

THE BIOGRAPHY BEHIND THE BIRDS
(NO 20 IN THE SERIES).
RUFIOUS SONGLARK (*CINCLORAMPHUS*
MATHEWSI) IREDALE, 1911.

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Tracing and reproducing the original source of the naming of a bird is, to my mind, a satisfactory completion of its life history.

Of the ninety or so scientific names that commemorate individuals who have made a significant contribution to Australian ornithology that of Gregory Macalister Mathews (1876–1949) is one of the better known. He was a somewhat controversial figure in his day, mainly in the field of taxonomy. He indulged a propensity to create subspecies. As a consequence many attempts were made to perpetuate his name in subspecies (RAOU Checklist – 1926). Today only *Cincloramphus mathewsi* survives (Christidis and Boles 1994). Despite all the controversy surrounding his work he did, however, make a very substantial contribution to our ornithological knowledge.

NAMING THE BIRD

Rufous Songlark *Cincloramphus mathews* Iredale, 1911. (*cinclos* – bird Gk. *ramphos* – bill Gk.) (Jobling 1991).

"Mr G.M. Mathews described the

following new birds from Australia:–

On behalf of MR TOM IREDALE, MR OGILVIE-GRANT forwarded the description of a new subspecies of *Cincloramphus* from West Australia. Mr. Iredale described it as follows:–

CINCLORAMPHUS RUFESCENS
MATHEWSI, subsp. n.

Adult male. Differs from *C.r. rufescens*, Vig. & Horsf., in being much darker above, and in having a shorter bill and longer wing....

The type of *C.r. mathewsi* is from Yalgo [sic], West Australia, and is No. 5198 in the collection of Mr G.M. Mathews".

Bulletin of the British Ornithologists Club No. CLXXI, Vol xxvii, 1911. pp 97–98.

GREGORY MACALISTER MATHEWS (1876–1949)

Gregory Macalister Mathews was born on 10 September 1876 at Merrygoen, New South Wales. He was educated at Singleton Grammar School and The King's School, Parramatta. During his boyhood he was an enthusiastic collector of bird's eggs – perhaps an early sign of the course his life



Figure 1. Gregory M. Mathews, C.B.E. 1939. Reproduced from: *Birds and Books* by G.M. Mathews, Verity Hewitt, Canberra, 1942.

was going to take. In Queensland he worked in mining, and on a cattle-station for six years, observed birds on droving trips, and indulging his love of horses. He returned to New South Wales to become an orchardist.

On 6 May 1902 he married Marion Cecil Wynne, a widow with two children. She was the daughter of Henry Charles White and first cousin to Henry Luke White – another well-known name in the ornithological world of the day (White 1981).

They sailed for England soon after where Mathews was to live for the

rest of his life. They first settled at “The Larches”, Wadhurst, near Tunbridge Wells (Mathews 1942). Hunting, races and horse shows formed a major part of his life until a visit to the British Museum of Natural History. Here he conceived the idea of producing an exhaustive work on Australian birds. Encouraged by R. Bowdler Sharpe, keeper of the bird collection, Mathews commenced this enormous undertaking. To be near the British Museum of Natural History he soon moved to Langly Mount, Watford. Working to the point of fanaticism he spent sixteen hour days in research, writing, skin- and book-collecting. Helped by hired collectors he ultimately amassed some 30,000 specimens. His library of 5000 books, which understandably, took many years to accumulate, covered every aspect of ornithology. The first volume of *Birds of Australia* appeared in 1910. From 1911 he was assisted by Tom Iredale who became his amanuensis. Between them they produced a staggering amount of work until Iredale left for Australia in 1923. The final volume – Volume 12 of *Birds of Australia* – appeared in 1927.

“In 1914 Mathews undertook a world tour, meeting ornithologists and extensively examining skins. Returning just before World War 1, he settled in Hampshire at Foulis Court, Fisher’s Pond” (Kloot 1986).

Mathews also published lists of Australian, New Zealand, Lord Howe and Norfolk Island birds, plus numerous articles, some of them supporting his taxonomic

views. To further advance his ideas he established in 1912, the *Austral Avian Record*, editing it throughout its 15 years of existence.

Inevitably, H.L. White and Mathews were to be in touch for about two decades and White did much to help Mathews by lending him skins (White 1981). Due to the worldwide depression in the late 1920's Mathews fell on hard times and was forced to sell his home and collections. White, who again did much to assist him, hoped the skin collection would return to Australia, but the price asked for it by Mathews was too high, and it was bought by Lord Rothschild. In 1932 Mathews learned that Rothschild had sold the entire collection to the American Museum of Natural History where it remains today. The skin of *Cincloramphus mathewsi*, collected in Yalgoo, Western Australia, is also there.

The sale of skins to America determined Mathews to donate his very valuable ornithological library to "..... his native country of Australia and in 1939 he offered the collection to the National Library of Australia, and accompanied the books from England the following year." (White 1981). During 1940-1945 he supervised its housing in the National Library, Canberra. In 1942 he published his autobiography, *Birds and Books: The Story of the Mathews Ornithological Library*.

Mathews was a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and was associated with many worldwide scientific bodies.

He returned to England in 1945, and died of cancer on 27 March 1949.

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(Editors Note: For Club members who have access to the Club library there is further biographical information on G. M. Mathews in *The Emu*, vol. 49: 145-148 and *The Ibis*, vol. 91: 521-524 and a photograph of him with our Club founder Dr D.L. Serventy and the Museum Director Mr L. Glauert in the *Western Australian Naturalist*, vol. 17: 218).